

Hymns: **262** “All glory, laud, and honour”
 264 “Make way, make way, for the King of kings”
 “Lift high the cross”

Readings: **Isaiah 50:4-9a**
 Luke 19:28-30

“THE PEOPLES CHOICE”

No-one can say they didn't see it coming. The man riding a donkey into Jerusalem is issuing a challenge to the religious and political systems of his day as radical as:

- Martin Luther pinning his demands on the cathedral doors at Wittenberg. A clear starting point for the Reformation which was to prove so divisive for the whole continent of Europe.
- Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn – with the consequence of separating Britain from the Roman Catholic Church.
- The rising up of the slaves of St Domingue against the army of Napoleon Bonaparte and the seizing of power to create the first black republic in the world.
- The refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat on the bus – a simple action that triggered a release of huge energy in the quest for Civil Rights for African Americans.
- The tipping of a cargo of tea into the waters of Boston Bay – with the loss of Britain's American colonies.

Small acts which led to convulsive, game-changing, outcomes.

As I say, Jesus had flagged his intentions for all to see. We may gawp at the length of the campaigning season for an American presidential election but this campaign trail was longer even than that. For three long years, anyone with eyes to see could have perceived that behind the events in which Jesus was involved he was challenging the systems of his day. Just consider:

- his instinctual ability to get alongside people,
- and yet, his capacity to remain seriously other.
- The “political” overtones, asides, innuendoes and commentaries woven into the narrative of the incidents in which he was involved.
- His readiness to do his business amongst the people rather than in any ivory tower within the administrative sector of Jerusalem.

- His refusal to make dogmatic statements.
- His readiness, when challenged (by soldiers or the religious hierarchy), to point the finger at those who wielded power- he was critical of their authoritarian style and, especially, their hypocrisy.

No-one was too little, too much of an outsider, too broken, or too grand to attract his attention. He'd been a man for all people, a man for all seasons. So this riding into Jerusalem carried some heavy baggage. There was the baggage of expectation, the depths of symbolism, and a frisson of "what-might-happen-next". Here was king riding forward to claim his kingdom – that's what the symbolism pointed to. Yet there wasn't a sword to be seen; no army awaited his command; there was no detachment of security guards surrounding him. The atmosphere was more akin to a Sunday School picnic than a coup d'état. It was all happening in the light of day – he was a sitting target, the whole thing could have been squashed by the click of the fingers of the Roman Governor or the chief priest.

And the crowd – poor devils – well they were at their wits' end. When it comes to a crowd, I feel it's our beloved Arsenal football club that helps me to understand the range of its possible emotional explosions. When Arsenal score a goal, the fans cheer their heads off, they send their triumphal chants up to the heavens, they announce to the world (on the Holloway Road) their undying love of their team. But when the opposition scores a goal (or even worse two), they pour derision on the team, they leave the stadium early, they demand the resignation of the manager Arsene Wenger. A crowd is capable of moving from triumphal and clamorous super excitement to dangerous and wild-eyed anger. In the twinkling of an eye. As we shall see in the way this morning's story pans out.

The crowd. Ah yes the crowd. The object of our fondest affection and yet capable of wrecking the best laid plans. Just look at how crowds have played a part in recent history:

- In the public squares of countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Oh those freedom-loving crowds of people chanting the joys of the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Iraq and Syria, the popular surge of hope was felt here in the West too. We applauded it, supported it, glorified it. They were, after all, becoming more like us!
- In the public square of Western countries, especially at times of democratic elections. Populist leaders of the right and of the left are energising vast numbers of people across Europe and the Americas, leaders whose style, exhortation, rallying calls, and narrowly nationalistic, mean-minded towards immigrants, - their speeches often reeking of racism in its various permutations (including anti-Semitism).

Yes, the crowd. "Hosanna!" they cried as Jesus rode by. Their cry was the cry of a lost generation, of a people under duress, weltering under the iron rule of the Roman imperialist and the punitive legalistic rule of their religious leaders who'd found a way to snuggle up to the Romans. The crowd meant its hosanna, I've no reason to doubt that. But they'd have shouted support at that moment for anyone who held out the promise of deliverance. Just then it was Jesus. That would soon change.

There was a hymn in the Methodist Hymnbook that I was brought up on that's no longer in our present hymnal. I want to quote it in its entirety.

When wilt thou save the people?
O God of mercy, when?
The people, Lord, the people,
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
Flowers of thy heart, O God, are they;
let them not pass like weeds away
Their heritage a sunless day
God save the people

Shall crime bring crime forever,
Strength aiding still the strong?
Is it thy will, O Father,
that men shall toil for wrong?
No, say thy mountains; No, say thy skies;
man's clouded sun shall brightly rise,
and songs be heard, instead of sighs,
God save the people!

When wilt thou save the people?
O God of mercy, when?
The people, Lord, the people!
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
God save the people; thine they are,
thy children as thy angels fair;
from vice, oppression and despair,
God save the people!

(Ebenezer Elliott)

People, the people, the peoples – are so often at the mercy of those who rule them.

- The press/media drip-feed them with poison as they reduce complicated issues to bland symplisticisms.
- The political order treats the crowd as fodder – shovelling out a farthing or two to keep them sweet, bread and circuses at one moment, “let them eat cake” at another.
- The privileged consider it a right to live at the expense of the poor – they can't see that a living wage for ordinary people is far less venal than the grotesque bonuses they enjoy. And all around us, here on City Road, are the one, two or three-bedroomed luxury flats that none of us can think of buying and, in the midst of them (although getting fewer and fewer) are the one, two and three-bedroomed flats in the public sector which, subject to “bedroom tax”, some of us may soon be forced to leave.

The people – fickle, fragile, combustible, possessing raw energy, a massive force for good. All of these and none of these.

Jesus, momentarily, has them on his side. The authorities meanwhile begin to have them in their sights. Hosanna! Will soon turn to “crucify him!”

When I began to speak in the open-air at Hyde Park’s Speakers’ Corner, my mentor the late and revered Donald Soper) gave me a word of advice. “When you’re out there my boy,” he said, “for God’s sake look as if you’re enjoying yourself. If you don’t, the British public will have the decency to let you suffer on your own.” It was good advice. The crowd wishes only the best. But it can turn away from you in the twinkling of an eye. Once you’ve lost the crowd, you’ve lost the game.

Jesus was the king riding in, on a donkey, to claim his kingdom. I remember another King, Martin Luther King, whose body was drawn on a labourer’s cart pulled by two mules as he went on his journey, to meet his Maker, and to enter the new Jerusalem.

Jesus is gloriously free as he descends the Mount of Olives. A few moments later he’ll be within the walls where the combined forces of Church and State, Religion and Politics, will conspire against him. And they’ll do it by turning the crowd, the same crowd, against him.

This was undoubtedly the most conclusive journey of Jesus’s life, a journey that was to change the course of human history, and on Palm Sunday we remember its beginning. The next steps of that journey will be taken over the course of this coming week and we’ll be giving all that our very best attention.

Amen.